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Two or three times, I've come close to being a cowboy. Problem was, horses don't buck one jump and quit, and all roping contests have a two-loop limit. Been to my benefit, too, to ranch in a catch tank county, or have river front. My score on catching the bottom check valve or fishing for broken sucker rods on windmill jobs matches to a tee the amount of loops I've thrown and jerked up the slack on air.

Learned the language, though I couldn't ride bad horses or rope wild cattle, or qualify as a windmill man. Wherever cowboys gather, be it Montana or Musquiz, I am sure I can serve as a translator. Know all their bunkhouse stories beforehand, too. Can make a good guess ahead of time why a puncher misses work on a Monday morning, or why the saddle horses didn't come in to feed. Even know a bunch of cowboy songs, except for fitting the words to the tunes.

Hiring day hands is another of my skills. Took 20 years to learn to wait until 6:45 a.m. to roust an old boy from bed to bid for his time. Call earlier and the whole household is alerted a herder is looking for help. Call later and the whole household will be awake enough to have a good excuse to refuse a job. Call much later after his wife has gone to work, and you'd be better off dialing "dial a prayer" than gaining even a promise to work a few

days. But to prove I know what I am talking about, I'll relay a skit of a call I made last week to a cowboy we call "Jack Dime Time," who was the last prospect male or female in the whole shortgrass country the week I needed a day hand.

Here's how the request went:

Me: "Hello. Jack. Don't you need three days' rest next week starting on Monday and finishing early Wednesday?"

Jack: "Huh?"

Me: "Need to work a little bunch of sheep early in the morning while it's still cool. Thought if you'd drive the feed wagon to bait the gates until we made a round on horseback, we should finish in time for you to be back in town to go to the bank and pay your insurance in San Angelo."

Jack: "Who is this a'talking?"

Me: "Ah, Jack, you're kidding me. By the way, I checked with the clerk and jury duty is postponed next week. Same party said the driver's license renewals are week after next. All four Mertzon churches are having revivals later in the summer. No christenings or baptisms are scheduled for children or grandchildren until then. And the wool house doesn't have any wool to weigh next week.

Sounds like the cafe is going to be closed for the next 10 days."

Jack: "Well, I am sorry but I promised Mother I'd mow her lawn next week before the grass grew so tall the poor old soul might be bitten by a rattle snake." (His mother lives in a garage apartment.)

Me: "Jack, I took your mother a cat for snake protection last Sunday. Tears came to her eyes thanking me for giving her son a chance to work."

Jack: "Gawd-a-mighty, I know who you are — Monte Noelke. Last time I helped you, I lacked 30 minutes putting in 24 hours the first day. I am looking for a steady job, but I do want it to break at sunset. Goodbye."

Study those points covered in the interview. I failed to hire Jack, yet every excuse is covered except failing health. Working wives make good doctors for husbands. Sometimes I'll get a break and talk to the woman before the man comes to the phone. However, young brides and girlfriends are a handicap. Mothers of more than five kids working at the cafe or the laundry 60 hours a week are the best bets as strong motivators for a husband to find a job.

The Big Boss was an early student of DNA. He tried to find my place in a long line of horseman. He couldn't believe I was his son, my being so inept at riding bucking

horses and throwing a rope. As I have written before, Mother covered her disappointments (over social ineptitude and academic deficiencies) by saying: "He's an orphan. Don't ask questions."

And how did it all turn out? The horse tuners who laughed are about all gone. The last time I remember throwing a rope was at a peacock standing in the gate of a leased place the other side of Mertzon. Best part of the story is that last week after a cool rain, I took a ride on a gentle horse without a critic around to appraise my style.